

## Student Reflection

### Desiree Demski-Hamelin



*Desiree Demski-Hamelin is pursuing a dual-master's degree in regional planning and public policy and administration, as well as a graduate certificate in cultural landscape management at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.*

During the summer of 2017, I served as a Conservation Legacy Environmental Stewards AmeriCorps member in the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Fellows program (NPS-RTCA). I was stationed at Freedom's Way National Heritage Area (Freedom's Way) based in Devens, Massachusetts, an organization that I had been interning with since 2015. Through this position, I was invited to participate in the first cohort of the ALPINE Summer Institute. These opportunities enriched my academic and professional careers, and challenged me to think critically about the future of land protection in New England.

The NPS-RTCA program supports community-led natural resource conservation and outdoor recreation projects across the nation. There are sixteen Community Assistance Fellows currently serving at NPS regional and field offices, as well as partner organizations. Freedom's Way NHA is a federally-designated living landscape that tells a uniquely American story and includes forty-five communities in north central Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire. Freedom's Way connects the people, places, and communities of the Heritage Area through preservation, conservation, and educational initiatives that protect and promote the natural, historic, and cultural resources of the region. It is important to note that I was born and raised within the Heritage Area and remain deeply connected to the region. This connection drives my passion for the work that I do.

My primary service project was to coordinate the inaugural event for the Freedom's Way Thoreau Trail. This six-day community-led walking experience was designed in the spirit of Henry David Thoreau and intended to explore the path from Concord to Princeton, Massachusetts that Thoreau traversed and wrote of in his 1842 essay, "A Walk to Wachusett." Each evening the Massachusetts Walking Tour musical troupe performed a public concert in a different community along the route. They shared the stage with local musicians and poets whom they invited to showcase their talents. This undertaking aligned with a number of other bicentennial legacy events in 2017 to celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Thoreau's birth.



This experience provided me the opportunity to foster partnerships with numerous organizations such as land trusts, trail committees, and historical societies within the Heritage Area. Getting to know the staff and volunteers and understanding the work they have been doing in their communities gave me an even better appreciation for the area that I call home. These relationships are critical to the success of Freedom's Way's programs and initiatives. I look forward to strengthening these bonds as I continue my work with the organization through my final year of graduate school.



The ALPINE Summer Institute was an excellent venue for me to reflect on my internship experience at a critical juncture in my life. Throughout the Institute, we were encouraged to ask ourselves why we do the work that we do and what we value about it. I found this exercise useful in analyzing other aspects of my life as well, such as my education and volunteer work. Additionally, my participation in the Institute significantly expanded my professional network outside of Massachusetts and into the rest of New England. I value this greatly as I look to launch my professional career next spring.